

# Tibet, Tibet



**Tibet activists must realise that further strangling Nepal's near-dead economy will not encourage positive change on the part of the kingdom's policy makers.**

Never mind the Maoist insurgency, every politically correct tourist now has a new reason to avoid Nepal. On 9 June, a California-based group called Ethical Traveler ([www.ethicaltraveler.com](http://www.ethicaltraveler.com)) announced a tourism boycott of Nepal.

Why? To protest Nepal's forcible deportation of 18 Tibetan refugees into China on 31 May. Several major international Tibetan rights groups have endorsed the boycott, including The Tibet Justice Center, Students for a Free Tibet, US Tibet Committee, and The Milarepa Fund.

Ethical Traveler and its director, occasional ex-pat Jeff Greenwald, are right to criticise the actions of the Nepali government and to demand a forceful protest. But they are wrong to think that a tourism boycott of Nepal is the best way to achieve the desired effect.

A prominent Tibetan rights activist called the boycott "a simplistic, kneejerk reaction to a very complicated and serious situation," pointing out that Nepal makes an easy target for the international activist community too intimidated to challenge China directly. If the objective is to ensure Tibetan rights, why not take on the real bully by calling for a broad-based US-led international boycott of Chinese trade?

Would-be tourist-activists must be told that further strangling Nepal's near-dead tourist economy will not encourage positive change on the part of the kingdom's policy makers. In fact, the weaker the economy gets, the greater the incentive for political players of all stripes to curry favour with China in the hopes of reaping future economic and political rewards.

The people most likely to be negatively affected by a boycott are common Nepalis and refugee Tibetans already resident in Nepal who survive off tiny pieces of the tourist pie. Ethical Traveler has claimed that the

boycott will have little true economic impact on individual Nepalis. This is a spurious suggestion when an individual shortfall of as little as Rs 100 a day can have serious effects on whole families who exist at the bottom of the tourism totem pole.

In the improbable event that this is right, then why bother calling a boycott instead of using the more effective and to-the-point protest strategy of letter/fax writing? A boycott with no economic teeth seems unlikely to achieve its stated goal of changing Nepali government policy through "direct action". What a lot of good intention wasted.

Ethical Traveler suggests that regardless of its economic effects, the larger purpose of the boycott is to keep the issue alive in the international media. Activists truly concerned about the shared future of Nepalis and Tibetans would do better to consider the Tibetan issue within the larger context of human rights abuses plaguing His Majesty's Government of Nepal. As one long-time

Western resident in Kathmandu put it, "The recent deportation of Tibetans is only one symptom of the much broader problem of human rights abuses in Nepal."

Singling out the Tibetan issue as the human rights issue in Nepal that is most worthy of international concern makes a painful mockery of the suffering experienced during the seven years of Maoist-state conflict by thousands of rural Nepalis, people who have rarely made an international headline or been the lucky beneficiaries of tourist-activism. It also sends the unfortunate message to HMG that while Tibetans are worthy of more careful treatment, their own Nepali citizens are not.

For this reason, the proposed boycott will spark new tensions between the Nepali and Tibetan communities. Most Nepalis, particularly those who suffer at the hands of their own corrupt and ineffective government, are intuitively sympathetic to the Tibetan plight, though some have asked why

there is not a similar boycott of Bhutan for its treatment of ethnic Nepali refugees. Unfortunately, a boycott of Nepali tourism called in the name of Tibetan refugees has the potential to draw stark lines between the two communities, hindering rather than helping mutual understanding.

Instead of alienating the Nepali public by boycotting travel to the country, the international community (tourist and otherwise) should engage with individual Nepalis and the Nepali media to raise the profile of the issue right here in Nepal. Nepalis will hopefully come to see the Tibetan situation as a feature of their own serious human rights problem, and begin to pressure their own government, police, and armed forces to adopt responsible human rights practices across the board.

Concerned foreigners should use their collective influence to join Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch in a fax writing campaign to Nepali embassies, government offices and the media. The high profile of the Tibetan deportation should be used as a platform from which to protest the dismal human rights record characterised by illegal detentions, disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings which are being documented across Nepal.

Ethical judgements are never easily made, particularly regarding a situation as complex as contemporary Himalayan geopolitics. Truly ethical travellers should take a closer look at the facts for themselves and consider boycotting the boycott. Better still, the morality experts at Ethical Traveler might call it off before the damage is done, and save everyone a lot of trouble. ♦

(Sara Shneiderman is conducting anthropological research in Nepal and Tibet for a PhD at Cornell University in the United States. Mark Turin is Director of the Digital Himalaya Project based at the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, UK.)

## Strangers in a Strange Land

Excerpts from piece by Jeff Greenwald in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 June.

### San Francisco Chronicle

'Landlocked Nepal is in a delicate position with China, its powerful neighbour to the north. Nonetheless, its action violates a central principle of international refugee law. Established by international treaty following the deadly repatriations committed during World War II, the principle—"non-refoulement" (ie "non return")—obliges nations not to send refugees back to a place where their lives or freedom will be threatened. Nepal has ignored this convention, and its assertions to the contrary are not persuasive.

What can we do? The Berkeley-based Tibet Justice Center ([www.tibetjustice.org](http://www.tibetjustice.org)), along with Ethical Traveler, offer a suggestion: One of our most persuasive diplomatic weapons as individuals, though we rarely exploit it, is our ability to withhold our tourism dollars from oppressive regimes. A popular boycott of travel to Nepal will send a strong message to the kingdom's officials, who draw huge profits from climbing expedition and visa fees. This boycott must be maintained until Nepal issues an apology to the Tibetan community, and an assurance that such a shameful lapse in human decency will not occur again.

It is ironic that this boycott should take place now, 50 years after runners carried word of Norgay and Hillary's monumental achievement from Everest Base Camp to Kathmandu. But the fate of 18 innocent refugees cannot be eclipsed by pomp and ceremony. It is crucial that we honour human virtue and courage in the best way possible—by compelling Nepal's authorities to answer for their actions.'

(Jeff Greenwald, the Oakland-based author of five travel books, is executive director of Ethical Traveler.)

that the essence of learning can be captured in just one or two books is a folly only found in Nepal. Why put a cap on knowledge?

3. *School fee ceiling.*

The government gets its share of tax from private schools, and can plough this money into bringing up the standard of other schools. If the schools are run as trusts, why raise this issue?

4. *Full scholarships for 25 percent of students from underprivileged families.*

How can this be done if there is a ceiling on fees? Ideally, children who can't afford good education will be subsidised by parents who can.

5. *Transparent accounts must be shared with parents.*

This demand does not have to be articulated for schools that are under the trust law, and schools under the company act are not obliged to share their transactions and are protected by company law. Parents can evaluate quality and determine whether the education is

worth it.

6. *Investigation team from Pabson, parents and student unions will inspect schools.*

The School Supervisor from the District Education Office is supposed to do these inspections and hardly makes any visits. This is the job of the DEO, not some ad hoc political group.

7. *Limit student numbers per class.*

What is the magic number? Do people making these demands know the correlation between numbers and structure of schools?

8. *Extra curricular activities every Friday.*

Why every Friday, why not every Wednesday? How long, and what kind of activities? Who will pay?

9. *Children of martyrs and victims of war educated free of cost.*

How many? From where? These demands show it is not about educational reforms, but about politics, pure and simple. Political parties brought this

country to ruin, and the Maoists have made orphans of many children. Private schools have been hounded for doing the government's job. Now they have to come to the rescue, and that too under the barrel of a gun.

*Sarad Rai, Satdobato*

**SNAKE, SCORPION, FROG**

Alok Bohara's letter (#148) speaks of "the current political stalemate" for which an analogy may be found in a popular Nepali belief about placing a snake, scorpion and frog together. According to folklore, none would be able to make a move: the snake, terrified of the scorpion's sting, would be prevented from going after the frog. The scorpion, in turn, would not be able to attack the snake for fear of being eaten by the frog, which would not dare bat an eyelid petrified by the snake.

*Name withheld, email*

**BIRTHDAY WISH**

What a shock to read that a 200-member 'high level committee' has been formed to celebrate King Gyanendra's auspicious birthday for three days. I urge the king through this letter to please ask this high level committee to stop the extravaganza. The kingdom is in crisis now with the western half of the country paralysed by a transport strike, a threatened closure of all schools, and the peace process in serious jeopardy. The king should call a moratorium on all celebrations till peace has been secured, and the peoples' hope for the future is restored. Nepal should be in mourning right now, and even when we turn the corner to better days, the kind of money and energy wasted on celebrations should be spent on reconstruction, rehabilitation and development with the monarch taking the lead.

*Deepa Singh, Maharajanj*

**NEPALI TIMES**

Let me thank you for giving us expatriate Nepalis a chance to read your columns and analyses free of cost on the internet. The content gives us an in-depth understanding of what is happening back in Nepal at such a critical period in our history. Special thanks to Kunda Dixit for his biting satire on the shenanigans of our rulers in 'Under My Hat'. Thank you for doing such a good job and keeping our spirits up.

*Rohit Gurung, London*

**BIRTHDAY WISH**

What a shock to read that a 200-member 'high level committee' has been formed to celebrate King Gyanendra's auspicious birthday for three days. I urge the king through this letter to please ask this high level committee to stop the extravaganza. The country is in crisis right now with the western half of the country paralysed by a transport strike, a threatened closure of all schools,

and the peace process in serious jeopardy. What if the king said, "Celebrate my birthday with pomp only when long-term peace has been secured in the country, and the people have hope for the future." Nepal should be in mourning right now, and even when we turn the corner to better days, the kind of money and energy wasted on celebrations should be spent on reconstruction, rehabilitation and development with the monarch taking the lead.

*Deepa Singh, Maharajanj*

**CORRECTIONS**

- In 'Give us our daily bread' (#149) the name of the proprietor of Pumpernickel Bakery should have been Norbu Shrestha.
- Both photographs accompanying 'Thapadom' (#149) were taken by Nhuchhe Man Dongol.
- 'Being seen' (#149) was written by Wayne Amtzis.